The Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Southern Philippines; A Class, Ethnic and Ideological Discourse*

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I. Introduction

Bismillahi rahman ir raheem.

Let me begin by expressing my thanks and deep gratitude to a new found friend and a colleague, Dr. Jeffrey Ayala Milligan, Fulbright and the International Affairs, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, for this singular opportunity of sharing with you today my thoughts on a topic that is very contemporary – the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Southern Philippines.

Mark Juergensmeyer (2000:159) in an article in Current History, "Understanding the New Terrorism," interviewed Mahmud Abouhalima who was convicted in the bombing of the World Trade Center 1995. In that interview, Abouhalima responded by saying that: "the government (US) was an enemy, a satanic foe. The attack was meant to create a graphic and easily understandable object lesson. The Oklahoma City bombing succeeded because the world was made aware that a great struggle (jihad) was underway."

Simon Reeve echoes a similar view in his book, The New Jackals…(1999:4): "the new breed of terrorist attacking the West has few aims. They just want to kill and punish for what they believe is Western Imperialism and the global oppression of Muslims. In their eyes it is a guilt by association."

From Southern Philippines, I received a recent email, which says in part, (16th June 2000): The situation is not getting better. Yesterday President Erap (Joseph Estrada) meets the Bishops (Catholics) and his reply to them is to call MILF to stop their secessionist demand, stop their terrorist acts and lay down their arms before (the) Bishops calls for peace is entertained. Today they attacked Rajah Muda camp and war erupts in Palembang Sultan Kudarat between Muslims and Christian communities. Evacuees are now in Calumpang Sports Complex, near my house, mostly Christians. The brutal killing of two Muslim ladies who were raped and tortured then sliced into pieces by Tadtad Vigilante Groups causes the war. The Muslim communities retaliated and chopped off the head of the barangay captain in Palembang believed to be one of the leaders of Tadtad. The worse is yet to come. Please pray for us."

With this brief introduction, we have outline this brief discourse into the following: Part I – a brief introduction and profile of the thirteen ethno-linguistic groups of Muslims in the Philippines, otherwise known as the Moro groups; Part II –

a discussion and an analysis of the three theoretical paradigms: class, ethnicity and ideology (i.e. Islam), in our attempt to understand the so-called "conflict" in Southern Philippines; and, Part III – the government responses to the conflict. Suffice it to say, we shall also explore what possible options are left for the Moros/Muslims in their quest for secession/federalism as the case maybe. At the end of the presentation, and if time permits, we shall respond to your questions for further understanding and appreciation of the subject.

II. The Muslim-Filipinos Profile in Brief

The Philippine total population of September 1995 is 68,614,142. The Muslim population percentage (official) is 4% though unofficially; the Muslims claim they constitute about 10% of the total population more or less. The estimated population in the year 2000 is 81,159,644.

Population

In the 1899's and earlier, the Moros claimed the islands of Mindanao, Sulu and Palawan as their "(ancestral/homeland)." Today, these geographical areas have been reduced into four provinces, also known as the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) with a total population of 2, 020,903. This year the estimated population is 2,126,910. Of the four provinces, Maguindanao registered the largest population at 662,180 persons whereas, Tawi-Tawi, the southern most part (near Sabah), has the lowest population of 250,718. Family planning is not well accepted and popular in these areas because according to them, "it is designed to regulate/contain the population of the Muslims," in contrast to the "in migration of Christians into these "frontier" areas where Muslims are the majority." If you recall, one of the demands of Abu Sayyaf is to discourage Christian proselitization of the people in Basilan, the area where the hostages were taken.

The Sultanate was introduced in the Philippines with the coming of Islam, brought about by "waves of missionaries" in the late 13th C. or earlier. Cesar Majul (1973) enumerated six theories to explain how Islam came to southern Philippines.

What facilitated the spread of Islam in the archipelago was reinforced by intermarriages amongst peoples along the trade routes in the international trade, which were earlier controlled by Muslim traders.

The traders and later, the missionaries married into the local chiefdoms which reinforced their control over these peoples. Intermarriages became an institution, which facilitated conversion and at the same time, a source for the international trade much needed in the building of the Sultanate kingdoms in Southeast Asia, also known as Dunia Melayu (Malay World).

intermarriage

In fact, the 5th and 9th Sultans of Brunei Darussalam, Sultan Bolkiah and Mohd. Hasan were greatly attributed to the expansion of Islam, and later the development of the Sulu and Maguindanao sultanates. At this period, Luzon (which was then known as Selurong) pays and annual tribute of 1 ganta of gold to the Brunei Sultanate. Both

the Sulu and the Maguindanao Sultanates claim lineage to the Brunei royalty. In brief, the Moro society can be seen as a highly stratified society (cf. figure 1).

When the Americans took over from the Spaniards in 1899, the Bates Treaty, signed August 20, 1899 was a tactical move on the part of the American colonial government to isolate the Aguinaldo revolutionaries from the Moro fighters in the south. Though General Aguinaldo communicated with the Moros of the south for a possible alliance, the latter did not respond. This treaty however, was abrogated on March 2, 1904. Later, the colonial government established the Moro Province, which was headed by a civil-military governor. It is interesting to note that almost in the same year, the American soldiers engaged in a fierce encounter the troops of Aguinaldo in the north and Pershing in the south. It is also a co-incidence that those who were engaged in the initial encounters were Nebraskans! Few days ago, we had the opportunity of viewing some of the artifacts that the soldiers brought from that encounter. Two of these artifacts showed one of the earliest Aguinaldo flag dated 1899 and that of a Moro flag in the south (cf. photos). Let us look at figures 2 and 3 with our explanations.

Part II – A Class, Ethnic and Ideological Discourse

At present, of the thirteen ethno-linguistic groups, three of whom are considered dominant, namely: Tausog-Samal, Maguindanaon and Maranaos (lake dwellers), only the Maguindanaon (people of the plain/flooded areas) were not given "equal attention" by the government, unlike the tow other ethnic groups. Thus, the conflict can be seen on two levels: (1) a class clash within the Moro society (i.e., old leaders vs. the new emerging (mga wata/children) leaders who are not necessarily from the elites/traditional leaders, and (2) a conflict among the thirteen ethno-linguistic groups, each group trying to have a "share" of the pie (i.e. political power).

Ideological Struggle

The Muslim ummah (community) is divided into two camps, namely: (1) the "fundamentalists" (for lack of a term) whose primary anchorage in the struggle towards secession/federalism as represented by Hashim Salamat, a Maguindanaon, insists on an "Islamic state" within the Filipino nationhood. (2) The other group whom we refer to as the "moderates," represented by Governor Nur Misuari. He opted to run as Governor of the ARMM as well as chairman of the Special Zone of Peace and Development (SZOPAD), which compose of the thirteen provinces, and nine cities, which were within the defunct two autonomous regions, Region 9 and Region 12. Presently, these two regions have been further reduced to four provinces, also known as the ARMM.

Hashim Salamat has submitted a list of forty-three camps within his jurisdiction. He wants the government to recognize them and at the same time extend some sort of "autonomy" to these areas. Some of these camps are the sites of the present conflict, which according to other sources may ignite a Mindanao-wide conflict/war if "militarization" in these areas cannot be stopped at all.

Though the conflict has not gravitated into as "Muslim-Christian conflict," the emergence of the Vigilante Groups mostly "Christians" is a cause of alarm on both sides. Moreover, there are areas on both sides where the population is a mixture of both Muslims and Christians. In areas where the political leader is a Muslim (like Kauswagan, a coastal town), the political leader is "suspected" to be sympathetic to the MILF. Likewise, in General Santos where the population is majority Christians, the Muslims feel that the political leader is sympathetic to the Christian majority. According to the latest news report from the Philippines, most of the camps were over run by the military since they were given deadline. The other camp also reports that several soldiers were killed in the encounter as well as the destructions of other military paraphernalia. This does not include the reinforcement of the widening cleavage between Muslim-Christian animosities, which will take years to heal.

Part III - Government Responses: Fear and Hope

In the assessment of government policies towards the Muslims in southern Philippines, the following social realities are most often noted: (1) the lack of an institution that addresses the problem in the south; (2) the lack of permanency instead, an adhoc "approach" in the resolution of the conflict; (3) the lack of "continuity" of programs on the part of the government. Each President/administration has his/her agenda, which begins and ends with his/her term. (4) Inadequate knowledge and understanding of the people's needs, aspirations and sensibilities; and, (5) indifference on some sectors to resolve the conflict. Mindanao has always been considered as the "training ground" for most military officers for further promotion. In other words, the so-called "initiation" always takes place in Mindanao in order to get promoted to the next rank.

In spite of the fact that then President Fidel V. Ramos, a military man and the predecessor of President Joseph E. Estrada, the former was able to convince Nur Misuari to come to the negotiation table and talk peace. As a result, an agreement was forged last September 2, 1996 to convince the latter towards a peaceful and nonviolent resolution of the conflict. As a result of this peace agreement, Governor Nur Misuari was elected as Governor of the ARMM and was designated at the same time as the Chairman of the SZOPAD. At a later period President Ramos and Nur Misuari shared a peace award.

In contrast, President Estrada has another agenda vis-à-vis the Muslims. An assessment of his policies is summarized by a respectable columnist, Amando Doronila of the Philippine Daily Inquirer: (1) a heavy reliance on military action to crush the rebellion; (2) absolute lack of economic and social development component in the response (all sticks, no carrots); (3) neglect of institutionalized channels for conflict solving; (4) highly personalistic approach to end the rebellion, underlined by the introduction of burlesque or circus in the peace process.

Estrada's response

Corollary to the above, President Estrada has reduced the Malacanang Office in Mindanao (during Ramos period) into a Presidential Assistant on Regional Concern (PARECO); (2) the BIMP/EAGA seems not to be a concern of President Estrada; and,

(3) military approach to the conflict is being pursued further with no hope of abandoning it. According to him, "over my dead body," responding to the MILF remarks on the issue of "secession."

A Gray of Hope for the Future

One of the most vocal critiques of President Estrada is the Catholic Church, who also believes that "militarization" is not the solution to the problem in the south. Furthermore, as a result of Vatican II, there has emerged through the years in Mindanao the so-called Bishop-Ulema Council, which meets quite regularly to discuss and offer solutions in resolving the conflict. As a result of the February Revolution (also known as People's Power) in 1986, the concept of peace has been institutionalized. Courses on Peace education were offered (both in the graduate and post graduate levels), in both private and public institutions as instruments of government to further resolve the conflict.

↑ of conflict-resolution/ Peace studies

There is an upsurge of Peace centers, NGO groups and others, which offer regular summer courses on interfaith dialogue. An example is the Silsilah Dialogue Movement in Zamboanga City, the Ateneo de Zamboanga Peace Center, Notre Dame University Peace and Development Center in Cotabato City, and more recently, the Commission of Higher Education (CHED) Mindanao Advanced Education Program. Of the eleven areas of specialization, Peace and Development has been included. The first batch of graduate students graduated last semester from this program.

There is also an on-going discussion towards Federalism as an option that can be pursued further. The only obstacle is that the earlier plan for CONCORD (Constitutional Correction for Development was discontinued because of the mass protest about the planned amendments in the 1986 Constitution. Likewise, the Senators are divided on the issue of Federalism. Few Senators from the south and Visayas (the middle island) support the idea of Federalism. The MILF has proposed the idea of Federalism as a possible option.

What the peoples of Mindanao fear is for the conflict to deteriorate and become a "Muslim-Christian" conflict especially with the re-emergence of the Vigilante Groups whose memberships are predominantly "Christian" who are likewise supported by the government. The Vigilante Groups were created during the period of the late President Marcos.

On the other hand, the Muslim communities are divided on the issue of autonomy/federalism. Some groups have publicly condemned the activities of the Abu Sayyaf as "un-Islamic", if not barbaric. Others sympathize with the MILF (but not the Abu Sayyaf). Those who support the MILF cause are rather cautious for fear that they might "lose" their government position/job. In fact, the government has suggested a national identification card for the Muslim constituents to draw the line between "enemies" and "allies." Such strategy has been tried and is still pursued called "divide and rule."

Let me end this brief discourse by quoting a statement from Abhoud Syed M. Lingga, Chairman, Ulema-Professional Executive Committee, in a Mindanao Peace Forum held last August 7, 1999 at the University of the Philippines, Quezon City: "Holding of a plebiscite under the supervision of the UN to determine whether the Bangsa Moro would want to be independent or prefer to be part of the republic is the democratic, peaceful and civilized way of resolving political conflicts."

Furthermore, though the East Timor political experience is not exactly similar with that of Southern Philippines, perhaps, a similar option can be pursued further, and it is feasible. Another option could be the American experience vis-à-vis the Indian nations. Why not? The problem is, the Muslim communities are not considered by the national government as a "nation."

A win-win situation can be pursued further if both parties (RP-MILF) are willing to sit down and discuss such an alternative. America as a super power, rather, the super power, can very well serve as the "peace maker" and "negotiator" in this localized but nevertheless have international ramifications/implications vis-à-vis American concern for global "threats."?

This perceived role of the US augurs well with the belief that: "The US holds in its hands the torch of freedom; that the US, and only the US lifestyles is the best on earth, and its spread is beneficial to everyone – this was always the dynamic nerve of American foreign policy, Karen Brutents, (Russian Social Science Review, May-June 2000:51)."

A class (structure) "clash" between/amongst the traditional political leaders (mostly descendants of the traditional leaders, coopted by the Americans with the "new emerging leaders" (considered mga wata (i.e., children) by the former. This class-clash between and amongst the peoples within the Moro/Muslim society is a result of the American concept of "democracy" which begun in 1899.

Of the thirteen ethno-linguistic groups, three of whom who are considered dominant, namely: Tausog-Samal, Maguindanao and Maranao, only the Maguindanao group (led by Hashim Salamat) were not given "equal attention" by the government, unlike the two others who have been given "some concessions." To some extent, the conflict maybe seen as an attempt of the Maguindanaon group to get the government attention by engaging in actual conflict with government troops since they feel that they are being left out in the negotiation.

Thus, the conflict can be seen on two levels: (1) a class-clash within the Moro society (i.e., old leaders) vs. the new emerging leaders (i.e., mga wata/children), whose lineage are not necessarily from the elite/traditional leaders; and, (2) a conflict among the thirteen ethno-linguisitic groups, each group trying to have a "share of the pie" (political power) emanating and controlled by the majority Christians from the north.

Thank you and good day everyone.

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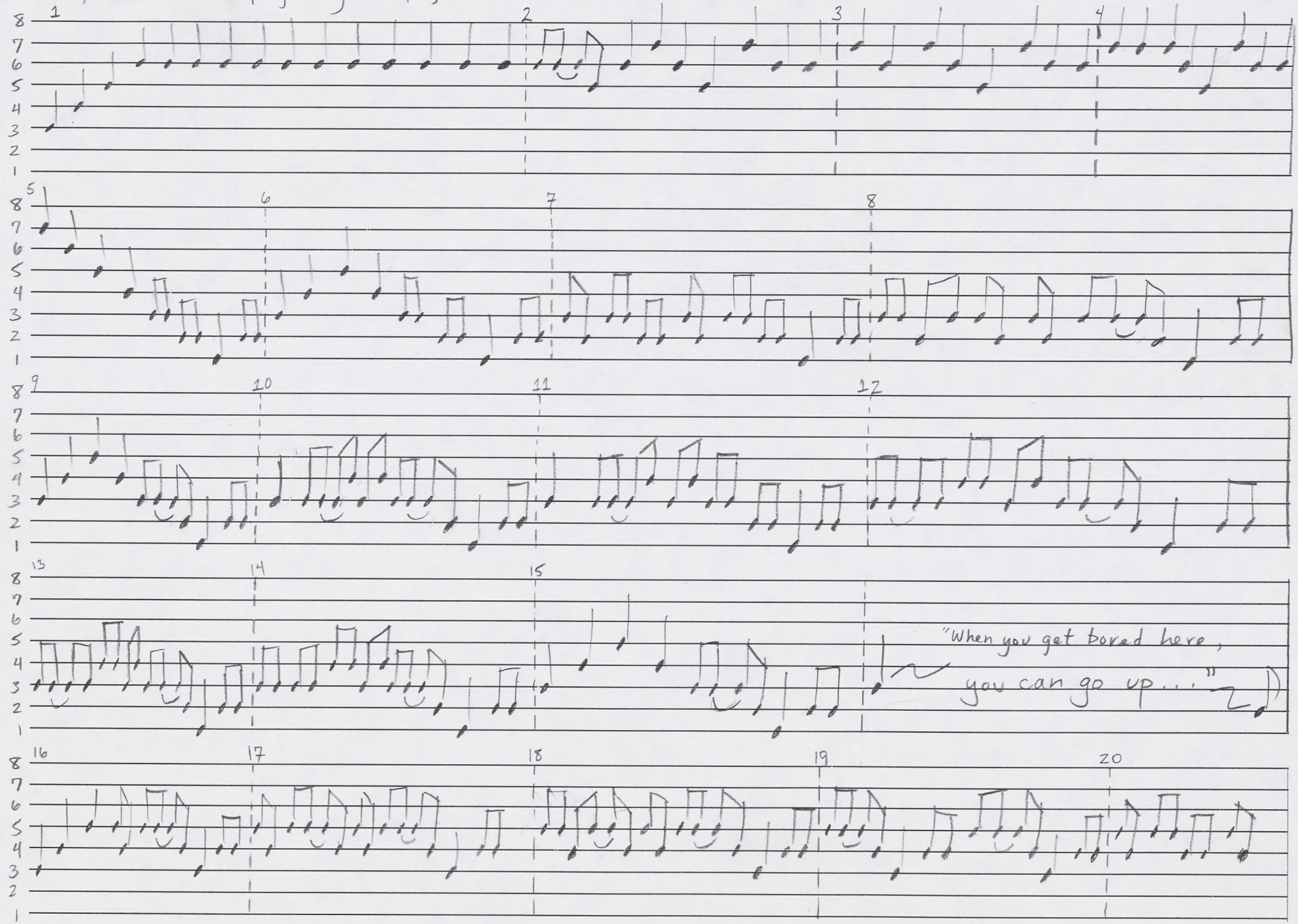
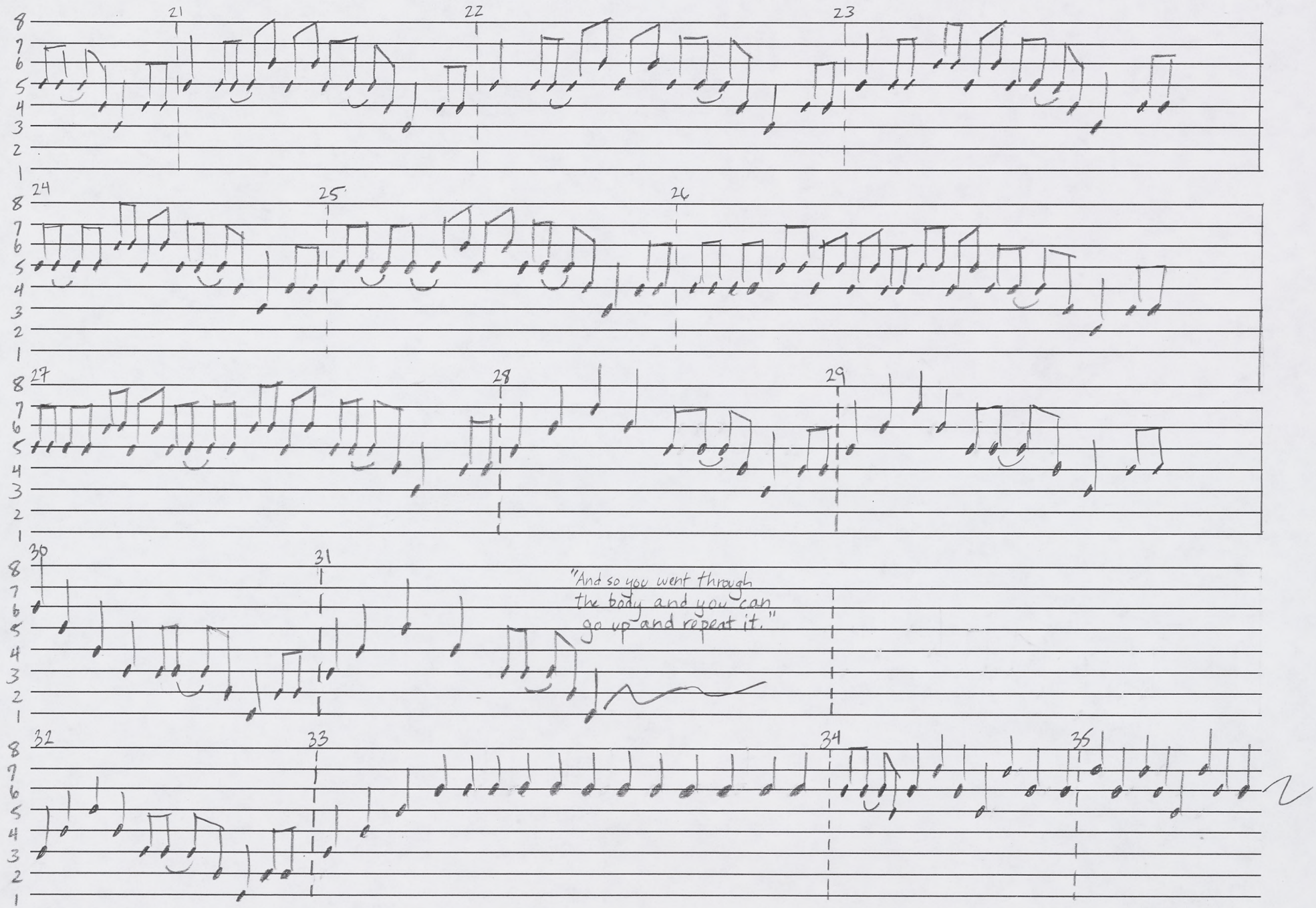
KASULAMPID

"You time it with all the accompaniment..."

played by Usopay Cadar June 7, 2000. UCLA, California



Transcription from taped interview by Eleanor T. Lipat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"And so you went through the body and you can go up and repeat it."
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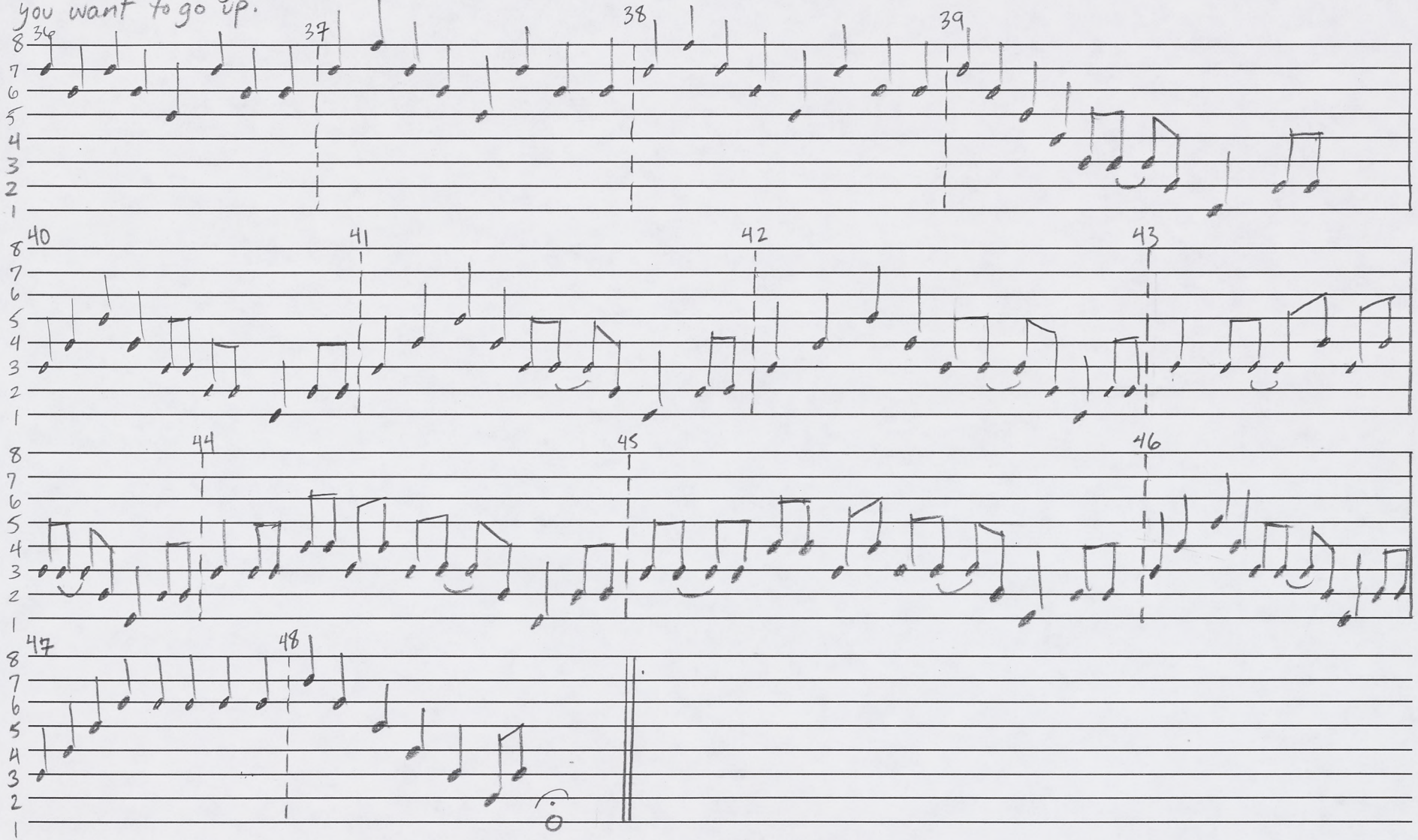
"...this time maybe you want to go up."